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ABSTRACT

The study of foreign languages provides advantages both to the individual and to society. These include a perspective on one's native language, as well as the fostering of a facility for learning other languages, international understanding, and industrial prosperity. In addition, the study of language reveals the close interrelationship between language and thought and language and culture. Thus the study of language has benefits which go beyond the traditional reasons given for language study. (AM)

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LANGUAGE: THE BASIC OF EDUCATION*

Harry Reinert

It's been almost two decades since I began my teaching career at Edmonds High School in 1958. My first assignment was six classes of Latin each day--which tells you that this all took place long ago. We had three days in which to prepare our rooms before the students arrived, and I felt that I should have something in the room that would be deep and significant for the eager young learners. So, I composed a motto, Lingua mater scientiae, which I then hung in the front of the room. For those of you whose recollection of Latin has eroded, the translation is "Language is the mother of knowlege." The remarkable thing about this particular motto is that its significance seems greater to me today than it did all those years ago.

To some degree, the truth that lies buried in that motto is at the heart of the theme of this conference, and I'd like to reflect on some further implications of this notion. I realize that since you are also language teachers, I will not be saying anything that you don't already know, but rather I hope to remind you of some truths that we may sometimes forget in the crush of the nitty-gritty of everyday classroom management.

Even as professional language teachers, I suspect that we frequently forget that we are dealing with the greatest power known to man and with that which is the crowning achievement of human intelligence. I will contend that man is the only animal which has language, and it is this possession, in and of itself, that gives man whatever power he has over any other aspects of nature. Yes, I know about the porpoises, chimpanzees and other animals that communicate with one another, sometimes on a fairly sophisticated level. But we must distinguish between sheer communication and the use of language. Although all language is a form of communication, not all communication is language. Signs or signals can be used to communicate, that is, to convey information. Many of us have learned this when we've been in a country where we didn't know the language, and we've resorted to what we call "sign" language in order to seek information or to make known some basic need. "Body" language, which has received some attention in recent years, also communicates feelings or intentions. Sign language, body language, flashing red lights (or even red lights that do not flash) all have this much in common--they are

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signals which communicate. But none of these is true language.

Language does more than communicate simple messages. Language by its very nature has a measure of flexibility in it that is lacking in signals. It is this flexibility which at different times is our despair and our joy. And it is this element of flexibility that gives language its real value as the basis of knowledge. Language, as Ernst Cassirer says, is a system of symbols, rather than of signals. The difference is just this--a signal is fixed and predetermined in meaning. As such, signals are very efficient, but each signal has only one use; a signal has meaning only in a specific context. Symbols on the other hand are never completely defined, but indicate only a general area of meaning which must then be momentarily specified by a particular context. But a given symbol may have more than one meaning in a given context (as we learned in our college lit classes) and may also be used with different meanings in different contexts. We might illustrate this with Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussions of the problems encountered in trying to define such a common word as "game." Wittgenstein points out that whenever we try to specify the precise ingredients necessary for a game, we find another instance where the specifications do not apply. Consider, for example, the following games; football, chess, Twenty Questions. What do they have in common? Or what do they have in common with Eric Burns' fascinating The Games People Play? This elusive quality of the term might be illustrated with a story which I have stolen from a Johnny Carson show of several years ago:

> A young man was hunting in a forest, and he became separated from his companions. He came to a clearing in the forest, and there he saw a beautiful young girl, scantily clad.
> "Pardon me," the young man said, "but I'm looking for game."
> "I'm game," the beautiful young girl said softly, suggestively.
> So he shot her.

Getting back to Wittgenstein, he consludes that perhaps sometimes what we really need in definition is not a crystal clear photograph, but a picture "with fuzzy edges." That's just what a symbol is: a picture with fuzzy edges. And that's what language is: a system of symbols, which is to say that every language will always have many fuzzy edges.

This variable character of our own language generally goes unnoticed. But we become very aware of it when we try to deal with another language. And, of course, we've all heard the plaints of our students: "why do they have two words for the same thing?" "how do you know when this word is supposed to mean this and when it's supposed to mean that?" As frustrating as this variable character of language is, it is also this same characteristic which gives language its value as the basis of all knowledge. As illustrated earlier by the example of "game," we can take a term that appears relatively fixed in meaning and then use that term to organize new information into a recognizable and useable pattern, as when we speak of the "games" people play.

I would suggest to you that the ability to organize data into patterns--which we usually call "ideas"--is exactly what is meant by knowledge. And I will further suggest that there are no ideas without language. To test this, I defy you to think of a single idea which is not formed with words. Notice that I refer to "ideas"--I'm not talking about feelings, mental images, sounds, tastes, or anything else. Notice also how we commonly use the language: we "recognize" the taste of sugar, the smell of wood burning, the sound of a clarinet, or the color red. But we "know" that yeast makes bread rise, that Mozart was a composer, or that blood is red. Do you still doubt this distinction? What do you answer, then, when a child asks "What does coffee taste like?" or "What does a skunk smell like?" And how many clichés are founded on the attempt to answer the question, "How does it feel to be in love?"

What I'm suggesting to you, then, is that both philosophically and in the ordinary use of the language, knowledge and language go hand in hand, that where there is no language, there is no knowledge. I've also tried to make clear that strictly speaking we do not claim to "know" feelings, sounds, sights, or the objects of the other senses--we "recognize" such objects, but we do not _know_ them. This becomes more apparent in some other languages; for example, in German the student must cope with the distinction between _kennen_ (to recognize), _können_ (to be able), and _wissen_ (to know facts), each of which at times may be translated into English as "to know." As one final illustration of this, let me cite a passage from Helen Keller's _Autobiography_. Of all persons within our heritage, her testimony should be the most telling, for she was one of the very rare persons who actually had a living memory of what it means to be without language. Since she had been both blind and deaf since infancy, by the age of six Helen still could communicate only with a few crude signals: a push, a pull, a nod. She wrote: "The few signs I used became less and less adequate, and my failures to make myself understood were invariably followed by outbursts of passion. I felt as if invisible hands were holding me." Helen's teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, on a spring day took Helen for a walk in the garden, where someone was drawing water. Helen described the experience in this way:

> My teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word _water_, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddently I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten--a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!

I have been proposing to you that knowledge be defined as composed of ideas, and that ideas require as their _sine qua non_ the availability of language. This unique quality of language has a further ramification, for our language in a very real sense determines our view of reality. In the excellent CBC radio program of many years ago, "A Word in Your Ear," the claim is made that we begin by speaking as we think, and we end by thinking as we speak; that is, as small children, we first learn to use language as a means of organizing our sense data into ideas and subsequently into knowledge, as so dramatically expressed by Helen Keller, Later, however, we come to the point where we see the world around us delineated in the terms permitted us by our language. For example, why do we see a floor, a wall, and a ceiling as separate entities? It has nothing to do with raw perception --in each instance our eyes present to us nothing more than a plane surface. We make these distinctions because we have the words with which to make the distinctions. The same CBC broadcast points out that each language develops a rich vocabulary for those things which are important to members of that culture; for example, the Eskimos do not use the generic term for "snow" but have a whole vocabulary which is applied to the particular conditions of the snow, whereas Americans have a rich vocabulary to describe only slight differences in automobiles, but a refined snow vocabulary is primarily reserved for skiiers.

This characteristic of language gives us insight into the values of a culture. I find it fascinating that in Latin that the word for "lazy", piger, is a root word, while "diligent" is the negative of piger, i.e. impiger. Whether it be the case or not, I've always liked to think that this indicates that the Romans considered laziness to be the norm and diligence a strange state in which laziness was absent. Other vestigial remains of the cultural development of a people can be found in language. Consider, for example, the ancient prejudice against left-handedness. I understand that the ancient Greeks rarely used the proper term to refer to the left side but preferred such euphemisms as "side of good fortune" in order to cajole the evil spirits who lurked there. The Latin term for the left side, sinister, has come into the English language unchanged. And even in contemporary English we still speak of a "left-handed compliment." The same kind of ancient attempt to foil the evil spirits apparently lies behind the German blessing, Hals- und Beinbrunch, which in the American theater is abbreviated to "break a leg!"

In addition to developing new terms from their own roots, languages also borrow terms from other languages to express new concepts. English, of course, has done so much borrowing that it is sometimes difficult to find what's really native to the language. The Germans have borrowed thousands of words from English to convey concepts which were not previously integral to the culture, ranging from Job to fair to Bluejeans to Filmstar. The French have done the same thing...but they just don't want to admit it.

Both in terms of the way in which we perceive the world around us and the values we place on our perceptions, language provides the key. Such abstract concepts as "truth" and "reality" are also just as surely grounded in language as is "knowledge." The attempt to identify truth has busied philosophers since ancient times. There was once a man who was so greatly intrigued by the question "What is truth?" that he spent half of his life and a considerable fortune traveling to all parts of the world seeking to find the answer. He grew old and impoverished in the quest. Then he was told that there was a certain wise man in the high Himalayas who actually knew what truth was. So with the last of his fortune and with the last of his energies, the traveler crossed the Pacific and wound his way into the mountains. At last he reached the village where the wise man lived. Immediately, the traveler was brought into the presence of the wise man.

"Yes, my son," said the wise man.

"I understand that of all men on earth, only you can answer my question," said the traveler. "Please, tell me. What is truth?"

The old man nodded his head slightly, then answered. "Truth is a fountain."

"What?" The traveler's voice rapidly grew in volume. "Do you mean to tell me that I've spent thirty years of my life...I've spent several fortunes traveling to every spot on the globe...I've come across the wide ocean, ridden by train, by cart, and I've crippled myself climbing the rocky paths up the cliffs to reach this spot...just to have you tell me truth is a fountain!"

The wise man said quizzically, "Oh, isn't it?"

Let us consider what is the basic fault with any such answer as that given by the wise man. Look at this object. Now, try to answer the question, "True or false?" The question is ridiculous, isn't it? The question is ridiculous because a single term, a single class, a single object can be neither true nor false. Only statements can have a truth value. If I say "This paper is red," or "This is a block of wood," or "The moon is made of green cheese," we can say of each statement whether it is true or false, depending on whether the statement corresponds to reality.

And what is reality? My response is, "reality is what I say it is." What I mean by this seemingly glib response is just what I've been trying to illustrate: what we understand of reality is itself determined by the language we speak. Since all these concepts--truth, reality, knowledge--are so intimately related, it is not surprising to find that at the base of each concept lies language. Without language, there is no knowledge of reality, and thus there is no truth.

I've enjoyed this excursion into the metaphysical underpinnings of the subject which we teach, but now it's time to get back to the real world. (And now we all understand that the real world is what we say it is!) As language teachers we are constantly in a defensive position concerning our subject matter. Please notice that I deliberately did not say foreign language teachers. That we happen to be teaching French, or Spanish, or German or any other language other than English in an American community is a geographical accident. What is important is that we teach language. Let us remember that the next time we are challenged by the familiar question: "What does learning a foreign language do?" I believe our first answer should be to the question, "What good does learning any language do?" That's what I've been talking about for the past twenty minutes.

Next, we might answer the question, "What value is there in knowing more than one language?" What I consider to be the eternally valid answer is already implicit in what I said earlier--since all human knowledge is based on language, and since each language has a different perspective regarding reality, then the more languages an individual has at his command, the more that person will be able to understand, the more that person will be able to learn and to know.

To whatever degree, then, that knowledge is valuable, to that same degree the learning of more than one language is important. I'm sure we all know this; that's why we're in the field of teaching language. Unfortunately, however, very rarely do we try to get this concept across to our students or the public at large. As a profession we have opted for expediency--we have gone for the cheap shot. And, unfortunately, we have too often been found out. When I was in high school--just shortly after the decline of the Roman Empire--we were told that one must study Latin to go into any of the professions, and Latin was valuable because it would improve one's English. When I began teaching Latin, I asked my students why they were in the class, and I received the same replies. The problem was, of course, that Latin has not been necessary for any purely practical reason for at least a century. And Latin will improve one's English only if the student has some grounding in basic English grammar to begin with.

I am convinced that the rapid decline of Latin about fifteen years ago was not solely because I was teaching in that field. It was about that time that the students wised up--they found out we'd been lying to them. We lost our credibility because we had tried to pander to the adolescent demand for a quick return on an investment rather than being true to our commitment to genuine education. We tried to express the value of Latin in terms of dollars and cents or college credits, because we felt that was all the students could understand or would respect.

I am fearful that we may make this same mistake again. Let me say out loud what I'm sure many of us feel in our hearts but are afraid to say: most of the so-called reasons we give for studying foreign languages are a sham. When we pretend that learning a language will get the student a job as a stewardess on international flights or that learning a language will make it easy for the student to travel around the world, we are at best telling only a half-truth. We all know good and well that the European countries are so close together that one European language will be only of limited help on a European tour. I found in Italy that nothing but Italian was really of much use. Apart from that, English was just as good as German. But while I was in Germany and Austria, of course, the knowledge of German was a great asset. And it's true that if the person has all the other necessary qualifications for a particular position--whether it be as a banker, stewardess, or whatever--then, and only the, the knowledge of other languages may be an advantage. But this by itself is not much of a base on which to encourage students to spend two, three, or more years to learn another language.

To be sure, giving valid reasons for learning other languages--reasons such as I've tried to develop here today--is much more difficult than what we have traditionally done. But at least when we speak of language as the basis of knowledge, we are referring to an eternal truth and we need not fear that we will be found out later to have been lying to our prospective clients.